

VZCZCXYZ0000
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHGO #0539/01 2301059
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 181059Z AUG 09
FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9364
INFO RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T RANGOON 000539

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/18/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: BURMA: SENIOR GENERALS START A CONVERSATION; HOW
WILL WE RESPOND?

REF: A. RANGOON 535

[1](#)B. RANGOON 536

[1](#)C. RANGOON 527

[1](#)D. RANGOON 534

Classified By: P/E Chief Jennifer Harhigh for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (S) Burma's senior generals used Senator Webb's visit to deliver an unequivocal message: the GOB wants better relations with the United States. They want direct communication with Washington and have identified an envoy -- regime insider and former Ambassador to the United States U Thaung. It is certain Than Shwe believes he has unclenched its fist -- granting a first-ever meeting with a U.S. official, arranging a session for Senator Webb with Aung San Suu Kyi, and deporting an American prisoner as a sign of "friendship." The generals will look for a response. We should allow Burmese Foreign Minister Nyan Win to visit the Embassy in Washington following UNGA. We should undertake immediate discourse with U Thaung, including soon at the Washington level, to sketch out mutual expectations. Meanwhile, we should renew efforts publicly and privately to encourage dialogue between the regime and a "pragmatic" National League for Democracy, while seeking to consult with ASSK throughout the process. End summary.

A Fist Unclenched?

[1](#)2. (S) The first U.S. official meeting with Than Shwe was decidedly more upbeat than expected. He was clearly in listening mode. He did not appear angry or hostile, even upon mention of ASSK. He smiled and greeted Senator Webb and Charge warmly. He peppered the conversation with mentions of "friends" and friendship."

[1](#)3. (S) Than Shwe and Prime Minister Thein Sein worked from the same script during their separate meetings with Senator Webb (Refs A and B). Both cited an earlier, more positive era in U.S.-Burma relations while stressing that the current relationship could be better. The generals left no doubt they are reaching out, requesting "direct" bilateral relations, appointing U Thaung as an envoy with a direct line to Nay Pyi Taw, and suggesting an upgrade to Ambassador on both sides.

[1](#)4. (S) Than Shwe and his top brass clearly heard Senator Webb's message that ASSK's fate is critical to the USG and an obstacle that must be addressed for meaningful improvement in relations. When the Senator raised the matter of ASSK's release with Than Shwe, his reply was brief and non-committal, perhaps because the Senator broke in to give the conversation took a different turn (the Senator told us later he preferred to leave ASSK's status open rather than

elicit a negative reply). Nonetheless, Than Shwe could have taken any opportunity to launch into a tirade against ASSK. He did not. ASSK's own National League for Democracy (NLD) leaders told us (Ref C) and repeated to Senator Webb they perceive a possible shift in Than Shwe's attitude and are hopeful he is prepared for dialogue.

Expectations are High

¶5. (S) In another indication of the regime's intentions, the government mouthpiece New Light of Myanmar, in both Burmese and English editions, hailed Senator Webb's visit as a success under the headline "The first step of a long journey." The article explained that Burma enthusiastically cooperated with Senator Webb because of "its stance to deepen bilateral relations and relieve the disagreements between the two countries. In conclusion, the article said the Senator's visit is the "first step to promotion of the relations between the two countries...the first step towards marching to a 1000-mile destination."

¶6. (S) Meanwhile, expectations here are high among both government officials and ordinary citizens, with nearly all hoping the Senator's meetings will lead to a more positive bilateral relationship. Embassy officials were inundated by well-wishers, many of whom expressed their satisfaction that positive progress had been made toward improving relations, at a national day reception following the visit. The trip is dominating tea shop talk throughout Rangoon, with many curious about the possible longer-term implications.

¶7. XXXXXXXXXXXXX

Extending Our Hand...

¶8. (S) The generals no doubt believe they have taken an important and conciliatory step. Than Shwe agreed to meet with a U.S. official for the first time ever -- which has particular resonance here since the regime uses access to signal where countries stand in its pecking order (China gets SPDC members at its national day event; we get MOFA bureaucrats). The regime allowed Senator Webb to meet with ASSK, after turning down UNSYG Ban. (Note: To our knowledge, Senator Webb did not insist on an ASSK meeting prior to the visit, rather the regime previewed the possibility, asking if the Senator would be interested. End note.) On a note we perceive as less significant but still important, they deported an American prisoner as a sign of goodwill.

¶9. (S) The senior generals will expect a U.S. response, likely soon. We do not for a moment believe the U.S. should entertain a major shift in Burma policy based on the CODEL's outcome. However, we do believe the U.S. should take steps to acknowledge the GOB's invitation for direct communication and to explore what might be possible over time. In that context, we offer the following recommendations for Washington consideration.

Let the Foreign Minister go to Washington

¶10. (S) MOFA officials have indicated Foreign Minister Nyan Win wants to visit a renovation project at the Burmese Embassy in Washington following UNGA. The regime likely views this as an equivalent goodwill gesture by the U.S. We have no indication the FM will request Administration meetings. We understand the political implications of the recent ASSK verdict and the significance of September 2007 anniversaries. However, Post strongly supports granting a visit to Washington, even if certain conditions limiting duration or interaction are imposed.

Seek a Meeting with U Thaung

¶11. (S) We should seek a meeting in the near future with U Thaung to establish initial contact, explore his role and mandate, and ascertain his level of access to senior generals. Following an initial meeting at the Charge level, a meeting with a Washington-based official, perhaps at the DAS level and in a third country, would be an appropriate next step. Messages to U Thaung could include reiterating USG support for resolution of ASSK's status, following up on discussions in Phuket, including on North Korea, and exploring perceived win/win issues for future cooperation, such as POW/MIA remains recovery, raised by the Prime Minister.

Advocate for Dialogue between Regime and ASSK

¶12. (S) ASSK could not have been clearer. Her top priority is commencing, without pre-conditions, direct dialogue with the regime. ASSK also emphasized the party's pragmatic and flexible approach and a willingness to cooperate with the regime to find common ground, including on sanctions (Ref D). XXXXXXXXXXXX. We propose a letter to Aung Ky from the Charge on these points. It would be useful to explore, perhaps in coordination with Senator Webb, publicizing some of her remarks to clarify to the world her position and combat the regime's argument that she is rigid and uncompromising. We should also let it be known she supports outsiders visiting Burma, and even meeting with the SPDC, so long as they seek a balanced impression of the country's situation.

Request Meeting with ASSK

¶13. (S) The terms of ASSK's current house arrest are less restrictive on paper, though its remains uncertain how they will be implemented in practice. As we maintain our insistence on ASSK's release (along with other political prisoners), we should also encourage -- certainly in private and perhaps also publicly -- interim steps by the regime to allow her interaction with members of her party and outside visitors. She herself never raised the topic of her own release in meetings with Senator Webb. She did, however, emphasize the necessity of consulting with the NLD, including to discuss the party's position on the 2010 elections. Taking cues from her, we should urge the regime to allow her regular, unsupervised access to visitors. We should also consider how we might respond if, in fact, the regime eases the conditions of her house arrests and enters into meaningful dialogue with her. Even CEC members acknowledge the possibility of dialogue and progress with regime while ASSK remains in detention (Ref C).

¶14. (S) We propose to seek a meeting with ASSK at the Embassy level to follow up on Senator Webb's visit, and to inquire how the U.S. can best promote an internal dialogue between the NLD and the regime. If our efforts are successful, we could pursue a meeting with a Washington-based official, perhaps in conjunction with a routine visit to post. We note that other diplomatic missions are seeking our coordination as they contemplate similar requests to meet ASSK.

We Must Be Practical, Keep Talking

¶15. (S) Throughout her meeting with Senator Webb, Aung San Suu Kyi emphasized her practicality: "We have a dream list. We have a wish list. But we're practical. We want a solution." She also stressed her willingness to talk to the regime without preconditions. As related to Senator Webb, ASSK told Aung Kyi in 2007, "Let's agree we won't stop talking. Let's take things step by step." From our perspective, the USG should strive for the same end, seeking practical solutions step by step, while always continuing the conversation. That process can start, in our view, by responding to the regime's recent overtures.